

An Assessment of the Utility of Sanctions

Tony Boyles  
INTAL 6103: International Security Policy  
Spring 2010  
Dr. Lawrence Rubin

The modern use of economic sanctions in place of warfare is a hotly debated policy. While sanctions may be used as an alternative to warfare, the question of whether they are effective (and therefore whether they are an appropriate policy maneuver) is an open question. On one side, proponents of sanctions have made empirical arguments indicating that sanctions do achieve the desired effects with reasonable frequency. Their opposition applies a carefully reasoned, yet ultimately flawed, reconsideration of the definitions, operationalizations, and empirical evidence to conclude sanctions are not effective.

Robert Pape presents one such refutation to studies suggesting the efficacy of sanctions<sup>1</sup>. He opens his discussion on the matter with the assertion,

The decisive question I ask is whether economic sanctions are an effective tool for achieving international political goals, and if so, under what conditions. I do not address the broader question of whether sanctions are an effective substitute for war (which would require an analysis of the relative utility of both force and sanctions for achieving political ends.

I find this approach to be questionable. Consider sanctions to be a screwdriver (in comparison to warfare, a hammer)—were we to approach the study of the utility of the screwdriver using Pape’s method, we would place the hammer in an opaque box and observe the screwdriver. This approach to measuring the utility of tools is both comical and ineffectual. To look at a screwdriver and claim it is not effective is meaningless: we must justify measure the effectiveness of the screwdriver *relative* to another tool. Pape’s study is thus an exercise in futility out of the gate.

Looking past Pape’s methodological oversight, he provides a rigorous and agreeable definition of sanctions, up to a single point. He distinguishes between economic warfare and economic sanctions. This serves to distance his approach to defining sanctions from that of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Pape “Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 90-136

study he seeks to debunk. By defining the scope of sanctions differently than the original study, he achieves a different conclusion. This should not be surprising, and yet Pape believes it is fundamental enough to trumpet the superiority of his conclusion. To his credit, Pape may have been justified in doing this if he could provide a more appealing theoretical support for his interpretation of sanctions. Unfortunately, Pape fails to do this. His theory for the exclusion of acts of economic warfare from the classification of sanctions is

Economic warfare, such as naval blockades, conducted purely for the purpose of weakening an opponent's military capability in an arms race or ongoing war does not qualify as an economic sanction because it is merely a component of a coercive strategy centered on force, not an independent coercive strategy in its own right. This does not exclude the possibility that economic sanctions could be employed in war, but the expected coercive mechanism would have to be that the target state would make concessions because of its unwillingness to bear the economic pain, not because its economic weakness would lead to military defeat.

On this I must beg to differ. The act of weakening an adversary's military does not occur in a vacuum. If trade of arms is interrupted, the economy which ordered the arms may take a hit. Whether or not the nation is presently involved in an arms race or armed conflict is not consequential to this effect. Interrupting markets will harm the economy. Thus excluding acts of economic warfare (which Pape would title economic sanctions at any other time) is merely an arbitrary selection of cases which Pape wishes to excise from validity. Fortunately for him, it seems these cases represent a very small sample ( $N=1$ , so far as I can tell) of the instances of sanctions he analyzes<sup>2</sup>.

For the majority of cases Pape leverages as evidence in support of his thesis, I do not have any criticism. Without a much more careful analysis of the historical record, I could only cavil more about Pape's definitions. Instead I will offer that I find his argument to be modestly

---

<sup>2</sup> This is inferred from Pape's own discussion of the empirical history. Whether historical record corroborates this assertion is outside the scope of this discussion.

compelling: accepting all cases of concessions amidst sanctions is too liberal an approach to generate a meaningful estimate of the absolute effectiveness of sanctions. With this in mind, I would conclude that Pape's estimate for the proportion of cases which are valid examples of effective sanctions is a reasonable lower bound, and conversely the estimate of the study he refutes an upper bound. This is an appreciably wide range, but without more data and a larger set of the particular variety of cases in question, definitive conclusions concerning the efficacy of sanctions will remain elusive.

With this range, Pape has demonstrated at the very least that sanctions are not effective a vast majority of the time, irrespective of the relative effectiveness of armed conflict. However, without an alternative policy tool to analyze against, we are left with the uncomfortable decision of whether to advocate the use of sanctions or not. In the absence of other coercive policy tools against which we may compare sanctions, this is a fool's advocacy. Pape makes further inference based on the small sample of cases he accepts as effective that three hypotheses may elucidate the effectiveness of sanctions. First, they should not be applied unless the issue at stake is considerable in magnitude. Second, they are not the humane alternative to warfare which many make them out to be. Third, they may be applied in conjunction with force to generate results.

This conclusion has not deterred further research in the field, however. Hovi, Huseby, and Sprinz turn to formal modeling. Instead of examining the empirical data, they identify a disconnect between the *threat* of sanctions and the actual *use* of sanctions. They do this to suggest that the threat of sanctions is insufficient in some cases, thereby explaining the existence of cases in which sanctions are put into effect, and target of the sanctions makes the desired

concession<sup>3</sup>. In this way the researchers are defining the conditions under which it is rational for a nation to concede to the threat of sanctions, to concede to the institution of sanctions, or to endure the consequences of sanctions indefinitely.

If we accept this finding, we can infer something far more novel than Pape does: namely, that instituted sanctions are a selected (and therefore biased) subset of *threats* of sanctions. Sadly, Hovi, Huseby, and Sprinz do not extend their research to this length, but the potential exists for an empirical analysis which could supplant the usefulness of previous empirical discussions on the matter.

Besides the canonical assumption of actor rationality in the model, Hovi, Huseby, and Sprinz assume that there exists a meaningful distinction between lenient and potent sanctions, if sanctions should be implemented. They present this assumption with two justifications: First, it allows for calculation of threat credibility (implicitly as somehow inversely proportional to threat magnitude). Second, it allows a target to concede after the sanctions are in place. As a methodological choice, I do not see the advantage to building the model in this way as opposed to simply defining a single sanctions variable which is continuous between absolute embargo and no sanctions<sup>4</sup>. Neither of their justifications adequately address this issue.

Again setting aside quarrels on the construction of the model, the equilibrium conclusions of the model are interesting. Under perfect information, the imposition of sanctions is never in equilibrium for any set of conditions. Because we live in a world in which sanctions do occur routinely, we can safely conclude that this finding is *not* reflective of reality. However, in a system of uncertainty, there exist some conditions under which the imposition of sanctions is

---

<sup>3</sup> Jon Hovi, Robert Huseby, Detlef Sprinz, "When Do (Imposed) Economic Sanctions Work?" *World Politics*, Volume 57, Number 4, July 2005, pp. 479-499

<sup>4</sup> Alternately, if the model were simplified as suggested above, it would not be far removed from a simple bargaining model. Played out over an indefinite number of steps (N), an analyst may be able to reveal more on the nature of sanctions strategies, i.e. why not all successful sanctions yield concessions immediately.

possible. For this conclusion, we can potentially accept the validity of the model for policy guidance. I would, however, treat this with some trepidation until an empirical analysis of sanctions threats versus sanctions could confirm the real-world usefulness of an equilibrium in which sanctions are installed.

If we are to derive policy advocations from this model, sanctions should be effective when the imposition of sanctions is judged to be unlikely by the target. The optimal policy is to credibly threaten sanctions which exceed the target's pain tolerance. However, if this is not possible, effective sanctions require incredible threats which the sender intends to enact. In other words, *don't bluff*. This is not necessarily an easy trick to pull off, hence an empirical prediction about effective sanctions should more closely match Pape's than the upper bound. On the flip side, potential targets of sanctions should simply consider all threats to be credible, and decide based on whether the losses given will exceed the benefit from yielding no concessions.

The application of sanctions is a hotly debated topic for very good reason: it could stem the effects of warfare. Contrarily, it could exacerbate said effects. However, neither of the papers reviewed here offer definitive enough evidence to make strong policy suggestions in either direction (more sanctions or less sanctions). They do, however, offer the framework for designing the appropriate studies to tease out the information we ultimately seek. Are sanctions effective relative to warfare? Are they rational, given the probable costs of war? I don't pretend to be well-versed enough in this literature to know if these questions have been addressed, but if not, future research to address these questions may make fundamental changes to the way we approach coercive policy.